

The case-history of Poujadism

Among the most vigorous of populist movements in advanced capitalist countries since 1945 was the Poujadist movement, which flourished in France between 1954 and 1958. In January 1956, it won 53 seats, and 12% of the vote, in France's parliamentary elections.

Pierre Poujade, the movement's leader, is still alive and alert, and hailed the hauliers' fuel-tax movement this year as a vindication of his ideas. But Poujadism in its later years was fascist-coloured. Its best-known relict, Jean-Marie Le Pen, is today the leader of France's fascist National Front. Since the hauliers' and farmers' fuel-tax movement was not fascist, that seems to rule out any relevance of Poujadist history to the fuel-tax movement, or to anything contemporary except fascism or near-fascism.

The story, however, is more complex. In its first years, until late 1955, the Poujadist movement 'avoided any openly anti-worker or anti-communist attacks. It limited itself essentially to anti-capitalist demagogy'¹. It was energetically supported by the Communist Party, and might never have succeeded in becoming a national movement without that CP support.

France has long had an exceptionally large class of small shopkeepers, self-employed craft workers, and small farmers. By 1956 it had nearly a million small shops - over twice the number in 1936 - and 61% of them had no hired labour. From 1954 the small shops went into decline. The end of rapid inflation and black markets, the rise of supermarkets, the beginnings of mass car ownership, and a tighter tax system all hit them.

Pierre Poujade ran a small stationery shop in the village of St-Cere, in Lot, south-west France. His father had been an architect and a member of the old fascist movement Action Francaise, but died when Pierre Poujade was eight, leaving the family to be brought up in poverty. Pierre Poujade became an apprentice typesetter, a vineyard worker, a tar-sprayer and a docker before finally buying his little shop. In the 1930s he had joined the youth group of the Doriot movement - set up by a Communist Party leader who defected to form a breakaway group, at first leftist and then fascist - but he fought in the Resistance. One of his themes, later, would be that the Resistance had liberated France in 1945; now his movement would liberate the French people.

In 1952 Poujade was elected to the St-Cere town council on the ticket of the RPF, the movement set up in 1947 by General De Gaulle as a vehicle to return him to power. But in May 1953 De Gaulle, deciding that the time had not yet come, effectively dissolved the RPF. That created a political gap which the Poujadists would fill. De Gaulle's return to power, in the coup of May 1958, would finish them off as an effective movement.

In July 1953, another member of the St-Cere town council, Fregeac, a Communist, warned Poujade that tax inspectors were arriving in the village the next day. Poujade and Fregeac called an emergency meeting of shopkeepers at the town hall, and organised enough resistance to drive the tax-inspectors out of town.

Poujade decided to build a movement. This was long before the Internet or mobile phones. Poujade had contacts outside St-Cere from a previous job as a travelling salesman, and set out in his van to visit them. As the movement developed, he came to rely heavily on 'an admirably well-chosen category of tradespeople: hauliers and truck-drivers', to act as travelling missionaries for his movement².

Poujade deliberately limited himself to demands for lighter taxes and claimed to speak for all ordinary people - irrespective of class or political identity - against a tiny handful of swindlers in big business and big government. even in posters for the 1956 election, by which time the Poujadist movement had become much more clearly right-wing, that was the main message.

'If you are against being strangled by taxes, against the exploitation of man by man - arise! Against the monopolies, owing allegiance to no nation, who ruin you and reduce you to subjection. Against the electoral monopolies, who cheat with your votes. Against the gang of exploiters who live from your labour and your savings... Rebel! Like you, we want justice. Fiscal justice for the taxpayers; social justice for the workers'.

Small shopkeepers and small business owners responded. The movement was boosted by a series of acts of resistance to tax inspectors and bailiffs like St-Cere's.

In this period 'Poujade not only received but also accepted the support of the Communists' because in many areas they were 'the only people able to offer him cadres'³ and the best people to offer him press publicity. Often Communist Party members took leading local positions in Poujade's movement, the UDCA (Union for the Defence of Traders and Craft Workers; it would later be renamed UFF, French Unity and Fraternity). In his speeches Poujade celebrated his first alliance with Fregeac as the model for how his movement could represent tradespeople across all political lines. The Communist Party saw a success for their strategy of 'popular front' or 'anti-monopoly alliance'. On the occasion of Poujade's first mass meeting in Paris, in July 1954, the Communist paper L'Humanite praised the town councillors

of St-Cere for uniting across political lines to raise 'the banner of the struggle against fiscal injustice'. 'Today there are tens and tens of thousands, who do not question each others' opinions but who unite regardless of other issues to act as those of St-Cere did. Quite naturally, the 'movement of St-Cere' has snowballed everywhere...'

The CP found its alliance with the UDCA useful in factional battle against the Socialist Party, which opposed the Poujadists; and hoped that by adroit 'entry work' it could make the Poujadist movement an annexe to its own. However, the CP soon found that the Poujadist nest was one where no working-class cuckoo could prosper. Its petty bourgeois class base was too strong a shaping factor.

The Communist Party finally came out against Poujade in October 1955. Soon they were denouncing him as 'Poujadolf'.

Meanwhile Poujade built his movement with a hectic series of public meetings and a campaign of harassment of members of Parliament. When Pierre Mendes-France, prime minister from June 1954 to January 1956, tried to contribute to the fight against alcoholism by making a public point of choosing milk as a drink, Poujade went wild against him for insulting France's wine and champagne. Poujade's campaign against Mendes-France, who was Jewish, had anti-semitic overtones. Algeria's war for independence from France started in November 1954, and as it escalated, keeping Algeria and the French empire in general became a bigger and bigger theme for the Poujadists. They squared it with their 'non-political' stance by claiming 'a sort of equivalence between the humiliation of shopkeepers threatened with proletarianisation, and that of the nation, reduced to the rank of a fourth or fifth rate power'⁴.

In June 1955 Poujade sought higher ground by adding to his movement's limited programme of tax reform the call for an estates-General, explicitly modelled on the representative body convened by the King in 1789 which started the French Revolution. Meetings in each district should compile the people's demands and mandate their delegates to the estates-General, which would replace the rotten parliamentarians and ensure a 'return to the basic principles of the Republic, to the people'. Nothing much came of the meetings, but the agitation was enough to gain the Poujadists their 53 seats in the January 1956 election.

It also helped Poujade keep his politics vague and catch-all. The programme was to be defined by the future estates-General, not by him. In this period, however, Poujadism became more fascistic in its attitude to the trade unions.

Up to late 1955, Poujade had claimed to be friendly to the trade unions. Now he proposed to replace them by a Workers' Union tied to his movement. 'For us it is a question of breaking down the political compartmentalisations of trade-unionism

by means of the Union [his Union] and thus realising the unity of the workers on the national level... Our Unions are not a trade-union, their aim is to absorb all the trade unions into themselves... If the union headquarters can not fuse with us, well, we will bypass them... We will leave those who have not accepted our course to perish, because they will no longer represent anything'.⁵

The Poujadists made a point, in the same period, of actively supporting some workers' strikes - organising shopkeepers' strikes in solidarity, or giving material aid - but with the aim of tying workers in to a movement led by the petty bourgeoisie. For them, the petty bourgeoisie were the authentic leaders of the people. Positioned centrally at the 'crossroads' of all classes, they were also 'the last possessors of a particle of liberty, and they will take advantage of it to extend it to all'. 'Worker of France!', they appealed, 'now that this magnificent struggle is joined, of the small people against the predators, do not forget that our interest is yours'. Because, 'what is your ideal? To have your own little business, your very own. The workshop, the small industry: that is how workers can get on'.⁶

The evolution of Poujadism, despite all the efforts of the Communist Party to annex it to the labour movement, shows that it is a snare for workers to think that supporting the sectional movements of small capital can bring us socialist advance by a short-cut. As the French Trotskyists commented, looking back in 1961: 'One of the greatest faults of... the Communist Party's policy towards the small tradespeople and peasants was to conduct themselves as... pseudo-defenders of the small business and the little landholding. It was necessary, in the best Marxist tradition, to explain to those social layers that under the capitalist regime they are odiously expropriated by big capital, the banks and the monopolies, that social progress does not permit the conservation of these outdated forms, and that workers' power would assure them a transition without coercion towards socialism'⁷.

1. Les Bandes Armees du Pouvoir 1 (Ligue Communiste pamphlet), p.22

2. Stanley Hoffman, Le Mouvement Poujade, p.31

3. Hoffman, p.28; 4. Hoffman, p.99; 5. Hoffman, p.101; 6. Hoffman, p.231, p.256

7. Jean-Marie Brohm and others, Le gaullisme, et apres, p.197

Course: National Democratic Revolution

12073, Foster, The case-history of Poujadisme, c 2005

1733 words